

This essay is followed by a glossary of terms marked by * in the text

The holiday known as May Day tends to have two roots from which two separate holiday's manifest. Though occasionally they intertwine the focus here is on the May Day most celebrated by the global working class. The celebration is spawned from the bitter labor struggles that took place in the late 19th century industrializing United States of America. More precisely May Day began when the American Federation of Labor (AFL*) alongside the American rank and file demanded that "eight hours shall constitute a legal days work from and after May 1st, 1886."

Though today this may seem like a modest demand, at the time it was taken as a serious threat. The American employing class was not interested in heeding any demand from American labor (which it treated something like its property). Both sides knew what is was going to take to protect their interests, the employing class returning to their tactics of state terrorism, and the working class engaging in direct action*. Thus further agitating the already heated battle for the 8-hour workday.

For those who toiled for a living this was a miserable and brutal epoch in America. Work days typically extending 10, 12 and even 16 hours. Entire families struggled side by side in sweatshops, coal mines, fields and factories. Child labor was of common practice (toddlers of four years old were brought to the mills to "help" the older sister or brother of ten years but their labor was not paid¹) people lost limbs and died on the job like casualties of war. But this brutal era also nurtured in workers a consciousness of self, seeing capitalism bare and exposed it was easier to see who your allies were, making workers less susceptible to the farce of class collaboration*.

With such inhumane conditions the plea for an 8-hour workday was quickly heeded by quarter of a million workers on May 1st and swelling to 350,000 workers in a nation wide general strike by the second week of May. 10,000 people marched in New York to Union Square, 11,000 marched in Detroit, Louisville KY and Baltimore were remarkable for the open collaboration of multiracial workers. The nation was in revolt, but the hub of working class militancy was to be found in Chicago Illinois.

There are a number of reasons attributed as to why Chicago became the heartbeat of the rejuvenated 8-hour movement. Prior to the demands by the AFL, Chicago had already been noted for having the strongest eight-hour movement in the nation. Class-consciousness was deeply embedded in the minds of many Chicago laborers and the Anarchist* International Working Peoples Association (IWPA), which published five newspapers in three languages, claimed a large membership and quite a strong hold in Chicago.

By May 3rd the number of strikers in Chicago had soared to 65,000, immediately tipping the employing class into visceral reaction. And it's this brutal reaction by the owners of industry with help from the state that leads us to the most noted story of May Day and the 8-hour movement, the Haymarket tragedy.

On May 3rd a man by the name of August Spies was addressing a crowd of striking Chicago lumber workers, preparing to negotiate with the bosses over the 8 hour work day. During Spies oration many lumber workers had decided to go a quarter a mile away to stand in solidarity with the McCormick harvest workers who had been locked out of their jobs for over 3 months. The McCormick plant was being run by scabs* whom the workers were planning on confronting at shift change. Within 15 minutes hundreds of cops swarmed on the McCormick workers. Spies and the remaining Lumbers heard gun shots and quickly moved to the McCormick plant to support their fellow workers. The cops intercepted Spies and the lumbers, brutally attacking them with clubs and firing bullets into the crowd. The police succeeded in the outright killing of four workers and injuring many others. In response some leading Chicago Anarchists organized a rally in Haymarket Square the following day to protest police brutality.

To say that the police repression and attacks on people was a knee jerk reaction is to

¹ The autobiography of Mother Jones

misunderstand the situation entirely. In preparation for the 8-hour movement, the state and employing class had invested in state of the art weaponry. The Chicago Commercial Club had spent \$2,000 (that's \$2,000 in 1886 mind you) on a new machine gun, fully premeditating the use of violence to repress the working class movement. It's with this understanding that the protest against police brutality was called, and it's this reality that led to the heartbreak and violence in Haymarket Square on May 4th.

Throughout the day of May 4th Chicago police carried out massive waves of violent attacks on striking workers. However, despite their contempt and anger, 3,000 people still managed to gather in Haymarket Square for a peaceful demonstration, including the mayor. First August Spies spoke against police violence, then Albert Parsons spoke about the 8-hour day and as Samuel Fielden took the stage storm clouds settled in. Spies, Parsons, the mayor and a part of the gathering left most likely due to weather. Shortly after their departure 180 police approached the speakers platform and demanded that the meeting disperse. Fielden protested that the meeting was peaceful and should be allowed to finish on it's own accord. A bomb was then exploded amongst the police, wounding 66 and killing seven. The police responded by firing indiscriminately into the crowd, killing several people and wounding 200. Some evidence later came out that a man named Rudolph Schnaubelt was hired by the police to throw the bomb, giving state leadership a reason to completely suppress the revolutionary leadership in Chicago and arrest at will. But nobody has yet discovered exactly who threw the bomb that day in Haymarket Square.

The following witch-hunt was quick in coming. The state wasted no time in arresting seven Anarchist leaders (Parsons making the 8th turned himself in on the day of the trial) with no evidence connecting them to the bomb. Prosecuting Attorney Julius Grinnel admitted in his closing remarks "these men have been selected, picked out by the grand jury and indicted because they were leaders. They are no more guilty then the thousands that fallow them...convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and save our institutions, our society."

However, the witch-hunt and attempt to make examples of these men actually extends before the Haymarket tragedy ever occurred. A collaboration of businessmen self-applying the name "citizens committee" and the state had been planning on just the event arising. On May First the *Chicago Mail* asked that Albert Parson and August Spies be watched "Keep them in view. Hold them personally responsible for any trouble that occurs. Make examples of these men if trouble occurs." Seemingly the trial was already framed before the crime had taken place.

With out ever producing any evidence that these men were in any way involved with the bomb, all except Oscar Neebe were sentenced to death. Lois Lingg cheated the hangman by exploding a dynamite tube in his mouth, Michael Schwab and Fielden petitioned for clemency and were commuted to life in prison, the remaining four were hung November 11th 1887. It was proven that aside from Fielden who was speaking at the time the other seven men were not even present in Haymarket Square during the time that the bomb was exploded. Six years later Illinois Gov. John Atgeld set Neebe, Fielden and Schwab free as well as pardoning the 5 already executed men. In declaring these men innocent he proved that the whole trial had been nothing short of a charade.

Unfortunately the witch-hunt wasn't isolated to the "Chicago 8," but resulted in repression of the entire labor movement. The strikes for the 8-hour day began to collapse and about one third of the workers who had won the 8-hour day lost it in the month following Haymarket. Not many years later the AFL who had done a good deal in helping initiate May Day began to swing to the "right," completely disavowing May Day altogether by 1905.

Still the spark ignited in the U.S. began to catch fire worldwide. Before the 1900's May Day was already being celebrated by most of the European countries and in Chile, Peru, Cuba, Russia, Brazil as well as many other places around the globe. Important historical figures give their "political birth" to the events in Chicago, like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. But as May Day grew so did the attempted repression of it. The battle for and against May Day continues today.

Repression

One of the first Orwellian attempts at repressing May Day as a holiday came when the U.S. government declared May 1st as "Law Day," in which we would celebrate our freedom to obey laws. This seems to be done to purposefully undermined the fact the May 1st represents a day

where thousands of working people had to go beyond the law to win any kind of decent conditions for themselves and our class. "Law Day" hasn't had much success as a holiday (though occasionally drawing more celebration when called "patriot day") in the United States but one could assume that it has achieved it's purpose: the eclipse of May Day.

The attempt has also been made to redirect labors attention from a meaningful "labor day" like the first of May to a day with little historical significance in September. This serves multiple purposes. We forget our power to actualize our dreams as a class by thanking the bosses for granting us a day of our own, as well as furthering the myth of class collaboration. We forget our connection with the global working class by celebrating an unrelated holiday with no sense of solidarity. By forgetting where we came from, forgetting our martyrs and forgetting what we fought and won it makes it that much easier to take away.

May Day celebrations in the U.S. are still targets for police repression and brutality. In 2000 minor celebrations in Chicago, Olympia, Boston, Phoenix, San Francisco, New York and a handful of other cities all reported cases of police brutality and unjust arrests. In Los Angeles police surrounded a group of demonstrating Anarchists and after brutalizing them pinned them against a wall unloading 40-50 rounds of rubber bullets point blank. A youth named Robert Middaugh was given a 3-year sentence for defending himself and upon release will be forced to be silent or leave the jurisdiction. Such targeting of specific groups for their beliefs as opposed to their actions seems hauntingly familiar to the "examples" made of the Chicago 8.

Though we haven't seen such a massive mobilization of the U.S. working class in sometime our police forces still continue to militarize themselves over minor people's mobilizations (like the recent demonstrations against neo-liberalism or "globalization"). A majority of our police departments now have paramilitary units, which seems to have only served the purpose of terrorizing citizens. Much in the way the Chicago Commercial Club helped arm the Chicago police, big businesses continue to arm and hire police departments today. Using them for the protection of their interests at the expense of ours.

We have seen the enactment of multiple laws whose purpose is to usurp the power of working people and our organizations. Like the "right to work" laws* which disable a union of workers from keeping a closed shop, thus giving employers the ability to bring in anti-union work and bust the union. The closed shop was made illegal under the Taft Hardley Act adopted in 1947. The Taft Hardley Act also extends to outlawing secondary boycotts, sympathy strikes, jurisdictional strikes, limiting size of picket lines, implementing "cooling off " periods where workers are prohibited from striking, and union officers had to file affidavits that they were not members of the Communist* party. While some stipulations of this act have been repealed a majority of it's anti-labor laws remain in place ("right to work" states still exist). Laws and regulations like this are myriad, and more and more they continue to fight there way onto the books. Two centuries of battle and strife rapidly reversed by the stroke of a pen.

The repression of May Day then and now can be seen in many different ways, some more subtle then others, but one doesn't have to look far to see the correlation's between the battles we fought yesterday and the problems we face today. We can be the solution to the majority of our problems if we remember what May Day is and keep the flame of yesterday shining brightly in our path to tomorrow.

Long live May Day!

May Day holds far more then just a historical importance. Many of our demands from yesterday have yet to be granted today, and the ground we have won is continually being stolen from underneath us. An overwhelming amount of products we consume today (from tennis shoes to fruit) are still produced in sweatshops and come from the sweat of slave labor. Non-traditional agriculture continues to wreak havoc on our land, leading us into an eco-catastrophe far more cataclysmic then it's predecessor the dust bowl (neglect is causing top soil to erode away at a rate that could take thousands of years to rectify for starters). Capitalist globalization has opened the door for big business to burden developing nations with slave wage jobs, often times throwing Americans out on the streets in the process. This often fools Americans into racist scapegoating, blaming impoverished people in other countries for situations neither of us had any say in creating. Racism blinds us from seeing who's really at fault and whose interests are actually being served. We continue to witness the destructive effects in our day to day lives caused by systems of competition

as opposed to cooperation, ignorantly believing capitalism or state communism are our only options. The list goes on and on, and the symptoms all point to a larger problem; we aren't living sustainable or even desirably, thus the battle continues.

It's important that we remember May Day so that our past may never die, so that we remember all that we are capable of, so that the battle for our lives continues until it's won.

Glossary of terms:

Anarchism (or anarchist): a very commonly misunderstood political theory and practice, often confused with chaos, violence or disorder. Anarchism states that all forms of domination and coercion are unnecessary as well as inherently violence. Seeking to replace hierarchical relationships, particularly in human society, with voluntary associations based on mutual-aid and cooperation.

A.F.L. : federation of unions established in 1886, currently one of the largest union organizations in the U.S.

Class Collaboration: the assumption that the capitalist class and working class have common interests, therefor cooperation will lead to the most satisfactory results of each class. Tends to be based on the acceptance of Capitalism.

Communism (or communist): Replacing capitalist run economy with a state or socialized economy. Belief that capitalism will dig it's own grave and a "dictatorship of the proletariat" will take it's place. Most experiments in communism have failed for multiple reasons, mainly their authoritarian and bureaucratic framework. Typically based off of the works of Karl Marx.

Direct Action: a group of people or an individual taking action for themselves as opposed to assigning responsibility to someone else. Not relying on someone else to get something done for you.

"Globalization": The move to a multi-lateral mode of production. Working with Neo-liberalism which is the process of liberalizing the worlds economy, moving as much of the economy into the hands of the private sector. Replacement of local and state power with corporate control. Replacement of things considered "barriers to trade" (tariff, unions, laws, tax's etc.).

"Right To Work" laws: guarantee to employers by law that unions may not hold a closed shop. Has nothing to do with guaranteeing anyone the right to work.

Scab(s): someone who takes another person's job during a strike. Usually brought in by employers to help break a strike or bust a union.

Works cited: (and suggested reading)

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A Short History of the U.S. Working Class – Paul Le Blanc

May Day, The Workers Day..... – Andy McInerney

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Various reports from www.indymedia.org and www.infoshop.org